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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a platform for reappraising British television during the period of 1950-1960 by identifying the inaccuracy and bias of three firmly entrenched assumptions that dominated the history of British television between the publication of the Beveridge Report (1951) and the Pilkington Report (1962): (1) British television in the period 1936-1955 was based on the model of public service broadcasting constructed by John Reith for the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) radio; (2) the introduction of Independent Television in 1955 broke with the public service broadcasting tradition by introducing programs and programming techniques derived from American sources; and (3) Independent Television's popularist bias represented a substantial threat to the cultural and moral fabric of British society. Analyses of these assumptions trace their origins and evolution, and provide an alternative reading of the evidence to expose their inherent weaknesses and inconsistencies. (18 notes and references) (CGD)

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PUBLIC SERVICE OR SERVING THE PUBLIC: THE ROOTS OF POPULARISM IN BRITISH TELEVISION

Geoffrey Crook

Paper presented to the 1986
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Public Service or Serving the Public : the Roots of Popularism in British Television

Geoffrey Crook

The history of British television between the publication of the Beveridge Report in I95I (I) and the Pilkington Report in I962 (2) is dominated by a series of firmly entrenched assumptions. In summary these assumptions are:

I. British television in the period I936-I955 was based on the model of public service broadcasting constructed by John Reith for BBC Radio.

2. The introduction of Independent Television in I955 (3) broke with the public service broadcasting tradition by introducing programmes and programming techniques derived from American sources.

3. Independent Television's popularist bias represented a substantial threat to the cultural and moral fabric of British society.

This paper offers a platform for reappraising British television during the period I950-I960 by identifying the inaccuracy and bias of these three dominant assumptions. Two principal considerations have been bourne in mind. First, the necessity of tracing the origins and evolution of these assumptions. Second, the need for an alternative reading of the evidence which exposes the inherent weaknesses and inconsistencies of these assumptions.

i. British television in the period I936-I955 was based on the model of public service broadcasting constructed by John Reith for BBC Radio.

Reith is invariably cited when any assessment of the past, present and future of television is made. Yet it is debatable whether he had much to do with the television medium other than to preside over its adoption by the BBC in I932. By the time the BBC inaugurated a fully fledged service in London and the Home Counties in November I936, Reith was already beginning to disassociate himself from direct participation in broadcast management. It now seems clear that Reith's direct involvement with television was slight, so why is he so frequently given credit for being television's architect? There is no simple answer to this question. Reith's polemical assertions concerning the role that broadcasting should play have been generally incorporated into the establishment view (at the time and now) because they are both clearcut and emphatically 'moral'. The tendency to use Reith's ideas as a yardstick for measuring broadcasting in general has helped to encourage a view of Reith's direct invovement in

television's development as infinitely more substantial than it actually was. An examination of the conclusions drawn by the Pilkington Committee reveals a series of key phrases such as the 'assumption...that television in particular will be a potent factor in influencing the values and the moral standards of our society' (4) which could have come from Reith himself, so widespread had his influence become. It is significant that Reith as Lord Reith, was a principal witness in the case against Independent Television constructed by the Pilkington Committee. Many other statements about television which Reith made in his role as authoratative commentator have further tended to reinforce the notion that his direct participation was greater than it was. But the major source for this myth seems to have been the attempt by the BBC to model the television service on Reith's dictums in the post 1952 period. This tendency became arguably even more pronounced in the post 1958 period, suggesting a direct relationship between the BBC's construction of a self-consciously 'balanced' public service-style television and a desire to influence those who were in a position to make decisions about the future of broadcasting.

Accepting the arguement that Reith's ideas were more influential in the 1950s than they were in the 1930s and 1940s leaves a gap in thr accepted history of television. If Reith was not the architect of television, who was? The answer seems to be a triumvirate. John Logie Baird, the self-proclaimed 'inventor' of television; Gerald Cock, the first Director of Television; and Cecil Madden, who was given resposibility for organising programmes. There is substantial evidence in the form of programme content and recording techniques which indicates that Cock and Madden were happy to follow Baird's prescription for television and that Reith was clearly standing back whilst they did so. The opening of Alexander Palace transmitter in 1932 brought Baird's private enterprise into a direct collaborative association with the BBC. Although he was ultimately unsuccessful in providing an acceptable solution for high definition television, his ideas on the use of the medium served as a blueprint for those who were struggling to create a regular television broadcast service. Baird's solution to the problem of promoting his own system was a simple one. In essence he emphasised the medium's most obvious characteristic, namely that it relayed whatever the camera was pointed at.

Baird continually attempted to highlight the advantages of television's open-eye quality. His broadcasts to members of the Royal Television Society (4) during 1928-32 promoted television in a number of ways and even provided a platform for the first outside broadcasts. These

included performances of magic tricks which extended the frontiers of televion technology. A secondary but no less important strategy involved the relaying of events which were likely to attract attention because they were in themselves an accepted part of popular culture, such as variety. Baird thus identified the two major directions which live television was to be concerned with, documentary reportage and light entertainment. When Gerald Cock announced the commencement of a regular service in 1936 both possiblities were emphasised but light entertainment was given primacy:

> 'In November we shall start regular television programmes for two hours daily. There will be variety turns including dancing and skating. Informality and brightness will be the keynotes of television programmes, the finest artistes will be engaged...' (5)

Madden's programming interests are perhaps best summed up by pointing to his nickname of 'Legs'. 'Legs Madden' was in many respects the Busby Berkeley of television, a man who believed that a regular diet of dancing girls was a foolproof method of winning and entertaining audiences.

The relative autonomy which Cock enjoyed at Television Centre needs to be understood within the context of the BBC's 'establishment view' of television. Reith was not alone in largely ignoring the new medium. For many BBC employees, the new fangled medium was bitterly resented as an unnecessay drain on resources which they felt should have been used to enhance the quality of the radio service. Cock and Madden's response to am atmosphere of distrust and resentment was to go all out to demonstrate the versatility and potential widespread popularity of the medium. In this, technique was seen to be relatively unimportant. What mattered was variety - variety of programmes and most significantly, variety of the light entertainment kind.

This concerted effort to turn television into a popular medium was taken up with new enthusiasm in the post 1946 period. Technological improvements such as vision mixers and the super emitron camera (both in use before 1949) offered new levels of flexibility and sophistication in terms of presentation. The team which Cock and Madden had built up in the pre-war period remained substantially intact and was joined by new recruits drawn from film and show business backgrounds. The new team was keen to explore the wide range of possibilities which television offered. Reith, who had left the BBC in 1938, represented little more than a set of guidelines of what broadcasting should be.

Baird had established what is arguably a far more important tradition which involved popularising television by promoting its technological possibilities. This tradition which was refined and developed by Madden and others frequently involved demonstrating that television could do everything better than any other communications medium. The apparent denial of this

tendency by the BBC establishment in the early I950s and the construction of a Reithian influenced paternalistic and moral stance for television, were factors which contributed to Norman Collins resigning his post of Controller of Television in I95I.

ii. The Introduction of Independent Television in I955 broke with the public service broadcasting tradition by introducing programmes and programming techniques derived from American sources.

Implicit within this assumption is the myth that BBC television did not borrow substantially from American television in the pre I955 period. The reverse is in fact true. BBC television depended substantially on American television even during its public service phase of I952-55.

It needs to be emphasised that American television did not emerge until considerably later than British television but during the late I940s the medium matured quickly. American television in the early I950s had greater variety than its critics gave it credit for. Ira Avery has described American television at this time in the following way:

> 'At the beginning of the decade five of the vanishing big bands were on the tube. There were a handful of gameshows, a little news and sports, a single film series ('Hopalong Cassidy') about two dozen talking, clowning or singing "personalities" and eighteen live anthology dramas.' (6)

BBC Television's commitment to American formats began during its first phase of development. American films, 'stars', variety and magazine shows were purchased or plagiarised. American 'stars' (Bob Hope, Danny Kaye, Josephine Baker etc.) featured prominently in British programmes. A measure of this enthusiasm for American prototypes is discernable in the decision to end the first phase of BBC Television (I936-I939) with a Walt Disney Mickey Mouse Cartoon - 'Mickey's Gala Premier'. The use of the same cartoon to open the post-war service reaffirmed the BBC's faith in American produced forms of entertainment.

During the I940s BBC Television sent a steady stream of personnel to America to study production techniques and programming policies. Peter Dimmock made regular visits in this capacity. His report of a visit in I955 indicates the extent to which the BBC was dependent on America for a role model:

> 'A few months before the Coronation I was sent by the then Head of OB's to the United States, this time to watch American television coverage of President Eisenhower's inauguration and parade in Washington. I returned to London in February and at once got down to the job of selecting our camera positions'. (7)

This evidence contrasts vividly with that used by those involved in the campaign against commercial television in the pre 1955 period. For that group, the use by 'The Today Show' of a personality chimpanzee (Fred J. Muggs) for a spoof response to the Coronation, was a prime example of the crass nature of commercial broadcasting.

The assimilation of production techniques was a small part of the BBC's wider dependence on American television. Developments in programme format were also incorporated with extraordinary rapidity. For example, the BBC immediately emulated the American television service by purchasing the first of the filmed-for-television half-hour series 'Amos 'n' Andy' in 1951. Although the BBC's consumption of the huge range of half-hour shows that followed was modest by comparison with America, it continued to purchase what it perceived to be the most popular programming solutions. These included 'The Cisco Kid', 'The Range Rider' and 'I Love Lucy'.

Encouraged ny Cecil Madden, BBC Television had formed substantial links with leading theatre agents and impresarios including the Grades, Bernard Delfont, Val Parnell and Maurice Winnick. According to Madden, 'Lew (Grade) was a wonderful agent...he never sent me any dud acts. He was completely reasonable and never overcharged'. (8)

The Grades did much to persuade acts to accept lower fees for the opportunity of appearing on television at a time when show business was regarding the television medium with increasing suspicion. What had emerged in the pre-war period as a novelty was looked upon in the post-war period as a competitor. There was little or no resistance from visiting American stars who accepted as little as one tenth of their normal engagement fees for the opportunity of appearing on television. Lew Grade's connections with American artistes proved to be very useful for the BBC although there is no evidence that Grade had any interest in the medium other than as an additional source of booking fees.

During the early 1950s BBC Television's use of American star performers and American films became more extensive. The main reason for this was the increase in the availability of American material and personalities. One of the highlights of British television in 1951 was a 90 minute salute to Bing Crosby. The same year brought an attempt to win a younger audience through the engagement of America's latest singing sensation 'Sugar Chile Robinson', a twelve year old performer/composer best known for his creation 'Sugar Chile Boogie'. Looking across the range of programmes which the BBC Television service offered in the pre 1955 period, it is clear that American involvement was far more substantial than the self-imposed quota of 14% introduced by the ITA.

The variety and all-pervading presence of American influence in the BBC was not always obvious. Some of the more subtle manifestations are identified as follows:

Programme Lengths

Programme lengths were substantially influenced by the half-hour format which American television inherited from American radio.

Film Language/Editing Style

The emergence of a film language which acknowledged the limitations of the television screen in America proved to be a substantial catalyst for experiment within the BBC. Imported filmed series, particularly 'I Love Lucy', pointed to the potential of the close-up for television. 'I Love Lucy' did much to establish a new and more lively style of television film editing and shooting. Most of 'I Love Lucy' was filmed in medium shot but during the editing process this fairly static viewpoint was liberally interspersed with close-ups which indicated reactive expressions. The result was a lively style which worked well on the limited definition of early 1950s television receivers.

Genres

Television appeared to invent a variety of new genres during the 1950s. Arts and Current Affairs were two of these new genres and both developed in America. Current Affairs through the analytical reportage style of Ed Murrow, and Arts through 'Omnibus' (launched in 1952) broke new ground. Introduced by Alistair Cooke 'Omnibus' established a format for presenting and explaining the arts which is still retained by the BBC in its approach to 'Omnibus' thirty four years later.

Design

Set design for television production was a minor consideration in the pre-1950 period. This lack of concern was born out of financial limitations and a general failure to appreciate the aesthetic potential of design for television. The appointment of Richard Levin as Head of Design in 1953 brought a change of direction but one that again involved turning to America for a role model. Levin's main inspiration was Hollywood rather than American television. Hollywood also provided the inspiration for graphic design in British television. The film titles of Saul Bass galvanised the efforts of a small but influential band of British television graphic designers in the post 1954 period.

American television provided a lead in the early 1950s for two main

reasons. It was technically superior and considerably better financed. While television in Britain came to a halt in 1939, with the electronic industry and production staff ploughing their efforts into the war, America continued to develop its television service. The result in the post-war years was a relatively sophisticated technical system which was hungry for suitable material. This material emerged from the production context because of the promise of massive investments from sponsors. The search was on for audience-winning formats. At this time however, television was perceived as a medium which could address a variety of audiences including those whose preference was for culturally elevating material.

In 1953 Lord Simon of Wythenshawe was to write, 'I hope the BBC will continue to send over a stream of engineers, administrators and programme personnel so as to make all American experience constantly available to the BBC'. (9) But Lord Simon's views were also informed by a desire to establish the parameters of BBC Television's flirtation with American popularism. The anti-American stance which is apparent in Lord Simon's writing is manifest in a variety of ways including his evident dislike of the principle of commercially funded television.

During 1952-1953 the usage of the term 'American' shifted from a connotation of quality to a sniping reference to crass commercialism. By the time the ITA was firming up its decisions about the franchise applications, it was clear that however carefully applicants were vetted, the resulting programmes would be attacked as a product of 'Americanism'. The documentation for the franchise applications contains conclusive evidence that the main criterion for assessment was a financial one. Beyond this an element of 'balance' in the projected programme provision was a major consideration. The successful franchise winners clearly fulfilled these criteria. By comparison with the unsuccessful applicants, they were obvious choices. Comparisons between the professionally constructed proposals of the Associated Television group and those of some of the non-runners suggests that the ITA's decision was a straightforward one. For instance, one applicant based his entire submission around an elaborate panel game called 'Striptease'. This consisted of a panel which tried to guess the identity of a celebrity who arrived on set garbed in layers of additional clothing including a sack over the head. Each correct answer to questions put to the panel was rewarded by the removal of an item of extra clothing by the celebrity. Sufficient correct answers and all would be revealed if the celebrity had not already expired through lack of oxygen under the sack. Another applicant offered programming consisting only of drama documentary. Yet another applicant proposed a diet of Shakespeare and opera, claiming that this filled a gap which the BBC had left in its policy towards high culture.

The ITA's final selection of franchise winners was met with a certain amount of derision. Charges of 'Americanisation' were levelled from various quarters. There is little doubt that Associated Rediffusion and the other successful franchise winners offered a substantial proportion of American and American-influenced material but there were two obvious reasons for this. First, more American material had become available for purchase. 1954 had seen a significant about turn by the American film companies in their attitude towards producing filmed material for television. Led by Warner Brothers, 1954 saw the birth of 'Cheyenne', the first of many hour-long Westerns. The following year proved to be a breakthrough in amny respects for American television. New series including 'Gunsmoke' and 'Sergeant Bilko' along with more elaborate variety and comedy shows such as 'The Perry Como Show' were launched. These developments can be interpreted in terms of a growing sophistication in the construction of material for the television medium as well as the search for solutions to winning larger and more regular audiences. The need to attract viewers was clearly a crucial factor for companies which entered into the television arena. Thus the American solution, already proved in its country of origin, was irresistibly attractive.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, the majority of those with a financial interest in the future of Independent Television saw nothing inherently wrong in the concept of popular television whether it was British, American or derived from elsewhere. The Grades, Prince Littler, Bernard Delfont and other impresarios shared a love of showbusiness which extended beyond the profit motive. Their perception of what was popular and their respect for the 'quality' of the American product enabled them to survive and prosper. They shared with their audiences a common infatuation with popular culture.

It was clear that Sir Robert Fraser came to genuinely respect the possibility of an alternative definition of public service broadcasting, namely giving the public what it wanted in the form of entertainment. The first ATV Showbook of 1956 suggested that 'many will agree with ATV chief executive Val Parnell when he says there is a lot of culture to be gained from watching a great clown performing'. (10)

The Pilkington Report condemmned, at least by implication, this argument when it stated:

> 'to give the public what it wants is a misleading phrase...it has the appearance of an appeal to democratic principle but the appearance is deceptive. It is in fact patronising and arrogant in that it claims to know what the public is but defines it as no more than

the mass audience, and it claims to know what it wants but limits its choice to the average of experience'. (11)

James Curran and Jean Seaton have suggested that the Pilkington Committee seemed 'perilously close to despising what was popular and entertaining and approving only that which was rigorous and demanding'. (12) In many respects however, the Pilkington Committee were reflecting a widely held point of view, namely that popular culture and particularly American popular culture was bad for society. There seem to be two main reasons why the Pilkington Committee reinforced this notion. On the one hand they inherited the Beveridge/Reith stance that television was a medium which should ultimately be concerned with maintaining moral standards. On the other hand they managed to erect no other sustainable criterion for assessment other than moral panic about the condition of television.

Against this the enthusiasm for popular culture held by Fraser, his franchise holders and their audiences, did (albeit unconsciously) emanate from a wider range of criteria. Leaving aside cultural assumptions which favoured high culture and moral responsiblity, the popular perception latched onto characteristics as diverse as comic timing, film language, genre form and star quality - characteristics which had already enabled American film distributors to sweep the board.

The real motivation for the campaign against commercial television came from a variety of sources. In particular there was widespread fear that American popular culture exerted a harmful influence upon society. Martin Barker in A Haunt of Fears has identified the coming together of the Establishment, the Left and various factions including academics of all political persuasions and members of the Communist Party, in a consolidated attack on the American horror comic during the 1949-1955 period. (13) Perhaps Barker's most pertinent evidence in this context is his research into the stance taken by the Communist Party towards American cultural imperialism. Barker points to a 1951 issue of the Communist Party periodical Arena in which it was suggested:

'This entire issue of Arena is devoted to the American threat to British culture to all that is good and vital in our national tradition.' (14)

According to Barker, Arena went on to balance a 'rollcall' of Britain's cultural achievements against the threat posed by:

'...the export of films and comics...produced by great industries, no longer becomes simply a matter of increasing the profits of those who also produce them, they become in addition valuable means of converting

other people to the ideas of American big business creating the illusions of American world leadership.' (I5)

The 'rollcall' inevitably was entirely composed of the classics - 'Chaucer to Shakespeare', 'Byrd and Purcell'. (I6)

This campaign brought the Communist Party into an alliance with the National Union of Teachers, the Church, the Librarians Association, the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The result of the campaign was a far reaching condemnation of American media imperialism which fuelled and was itself fuelled by the debate surrounding the emergence of commercial television in Britain.

The debate did not die with the passing of the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act of I955 or the emergence of an Independent Television service on September 22 I955. Richard Hoggart's influential text The Uses of Literacy helped to refine and also to perpetuate anti-American feelings in the post I955 period. (I7) Hoggart's model of British culture which was threatened by the American invasion was as selective and romantic as the image of British society created by Charles Dickens. Hoggart's view of society was more closely indebted to the romantic preoccupations with working class culture associated with the British Left in the I930s, enshrined in the activities of Mass Observation in the I940s and perpetuated in the pages of Left Review and New Left Review during the I950s. Hoggart's evidence for the prosecution was an important factor in the case against Independent Television constructed by the Pilkington Committee.

More serious however, was the way in which the Pilkington Committee inherited the cultural snobbery which had fuelled the debate surrounding the emergence and development of commercial television. Although like all previous committees which had looked into the condition and future state of broadcasting the Pilkington Committee made no attempt to formulate criteria for assessing television, it did condemn the medium from a very specific point of view. This can be best summed up as high-culture hegenomy.

Ultimately the assessment of television, whether from the Pilkington Committee, Hoggart or other contemporary commentators such as the television critic of The Daily Mail, seems to derive from assumed and largely untested characteristics which they 'felt' rather than proved were contained in the artefacts produced out of high-culture aspirations and intentions. This cultural snobbery blinded those who were presented with or assumed the right to criticise the value of the American influence on British television. Instead assumptions that television's role was primarily to

elevate and instruct, brought a series of negative responses to those aspects of television which sought to entertain. Subsequent debates on the television medium have resulted in the erection of a number of more thorough-going means of assessing it. Structuralism has been one of the most significant models employed by the academic wing of television criticism. It is interesting to note that as recently as 1986, Angela McRobbie should suggest that 'structuralism has replaced old orthodoxies with new ones. This is apparent in its rereading of texts highly placed within an already existing literary or aesthetic hierarchy. Elsewhere it constructs a new hierarchy.' (12)

It would seem that the problems of achieving a truly objective assessment free of the assumptions of a value system constructed in another culture centuries before we were born, are still with us. The real issue remains one of high culture versus popular culture rather than public service versus Americanisation. The spectre of 'wall-to-wall Dallas' is still firmly anchored in an unspecified but firmly entrenched set of cultural assumptions which are ultimately used to insist that the taste of the few should prevail for the many.

Notes and References

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(2) Report of the Committee on Broadcasting (The Pilkington Report) 1960

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(I5) Ibid.

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(I7) Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy, Chatto & Windus, I957

(I8) Angel McRobbie, 'Post Modernism and Popular Culture' in ICA Documents 5 : Post Modernism, I986